

## **Stop greenwashing by energy sector**

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### **Body**

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In the run-up to the climate change conference in Egypt, you have likely seen an uptick in ads promoting "net-zero" oilsands and "clean" methane gas. This is greenwashing, and it is illegal in Canada.

False green claims discriminate against genuinely sustainable companies and fuel demand for polluting products. Most insidiously, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, fossil fuel disinformation obstructs effective climate action by undermining public support. As the report released last week by the UN's high-level group on net-zero commitments of non-state entities clearly stated, corporate greenwashing must end to reach net zero.

In September, I was among six concerned doctors, nurses and health advocates that filed a \$10-million complaint against the Canadian Gas Association (CGA) for false advertising of methane gas as low-carbon and clean. Methane gas pollutes the air and water, and is a super-potent greenhouse gas with 80 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide over the next 20 crucial years.

We were heartened to hear on the eve of COP27 that the Competition Bureau is investigating these ads - as they are RBC's misleading climate commitments, when they are one of the biggest backers of fossil fuel investment globally.

The Competition Bureau's proactivity on greenwashing is heartening. However, asking the public to play "whack-a-mole" and file complaints is far from the most effective approach to fight disinformation and protect consumers. Clearer regulation and policy are needed.

So, what could effective policies against greenwashing look like?

Firstly, we need a robust regulatory framework on green claims and updated guidelines, particularly for climate-washing terms such as carbon neutral and net zero. The UN report recommends that businesses can't claim to be net zero if they continue to expand fossil fuel infrastructure, engage in lobbying to undermine climate action, or count on offsets as a magic bullet. A draft EU anti-greenwashing law proposes to ban generic green claims and calls for all net-zero and environmental claims to be backed up by environmental accounting. In France, claims to carbon neutrality must be accompanied by a QR code with the data.

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Secondly, high-polluting sectors could be prohibited from marketing their products as green altogether. Norway introduced a prohibition against environmental messaging in car ads in 2007, whereby no cars, not even electric ones, can be promoted as green. It still leads the world in EV sales, with 65 per cent of cars sold being electric. France prohibits radio and TV ads that favourably present the environmental impact of goods or services that have a negative effect on the environment.

Finally, some industries, like tobacco, are so damaging to health and environment that they should simply not be advertised at all. Fossil fuels kill, and will kill many more people than tobacco. Fossil air pollution is one of the leading causes of premature mortality in Canada, and children who live in homes with gas stoves have a similar asthma risk as those living with a smoker. Fossil-fuelled climate change is the greatest public health crisis of our time; it's already a reality for many in Canada whose health is being impacted through heat waves, respiratory problems from wildfire smoke, increased infectious diseases and more.

In June, 35 organizations representing over 700,000 health professionals in Canada, including my own, called for a comprehensive ban on fossil fuel ads. In a world first, France has shown its possible and banned fossil fuel advertising as of 2023.

Advertising fossil fuels as clean while the world burns is as preposterous as using doctors to promote cigarettes. The federal government has both the tools and the responsibility to prevent fossil fuel gaslighting and protect the health of Canadians.

As world leaders gather to fight climate change, we ask our government to act now to stem such disinformation and to get out the messages to protect our health and our planet.

Leah Temper, PhD, is the campaign director of the Fossil Fuel Ads Make Us Sick campaign at the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment.

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